

Trump Against the Government: Officials Conflicted Over Lying for the President

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Once upon a time in the United States there was a consensus among national politicians that there were two areas where there should be a unified approach to policy. They were national security and foreign policy, both of which involved other nations, which made desirable a perception of unity on the part of the president and his cabinet, no matter who was in power. That meant that dissent from individual politicians should never rise to the level of pitting one party against another on the basic Establishment view of what was desirable in terms of U.S. national interests.

That viewpoint has survived at least somewhat intact to this day, even weathering the turmoil of Vietnam, but the apple cart has been somewhat upset by new players in the game, namely the various federal bureaucracies, to include law enforcement, intelligence and the Pentagon. The 2016 election demonstrated that the FBI and CIA in particular were willing to get involved in the game of who should be president, and in so doing they compromised major foreign policy and national security norms, which produced Russiagate as well as the wildly inflated current claims being leveled against China and Russia and even Iran looking ahead to elections in November.

As noted above, the Establishment view on foreign and national security policy was based on the principle that there must always be a united front when dealing with situations that are being closely watched by foreigners. If a cabinet secretary or the president says something relating to foreign or military affairs it should be the unified view of both the administration and the loyal opposition. Unfortunately, with President Donald Trump that unanimity has broken down, largely because the chief executive either refuses to or is incapable of staying on script. The most recent false step involved the origin of the corona virus, with the intelligence community stating that there was no evidence that the virus was “man made or genetically modified” in a lab followed by the president several hours later contradicting that view asserting that he had a “high degree of confidence” that the coronavirus originated in a laboratory in Wuhan, China based on secret information [that he could not reveal](#).

There has also been reports that the Trump White House has in fact been pushing the intelligence community (IC) to [“hunt for evidence”](#) linking the virus to the Wuhan laboratory, suggesting that the entire China gambit is mostly political, to have a scapegoat available in case the troubled handling of the virus in the United States becomes a fiasco and therefore a political liability. This pressure apparently prompted an additional statement from the Office of the Director of National Intelligence saying: “The IC will continue to rigorously examine emerging information and intelligence to determine whether the outbreak began through contact with infected animals or if it was the result of an accident at a laboratory in

Wuhan.”

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who [has claimed](#) without providing any details that there is “overwhelming evidence” that coronavirus came out of the Wuhan laboratory, is reportedly leading the push to demonize China. He and other administration officials have expressed their frustration over the C.I.A.’s apparent inability to come up with a definitive explanation for the outbreak’s origin. C.I.A. analysts have reportedly responded that there is no evidence to support any one theory with “high confidence” and they are afraid that any equivocating response will immediately be politicized. Some analysts noted that their close monitoring of communications regarding the Wuhan lab suggest that the Chinese government itself does not regard the lab as a source of the contagion.

To be sure, any intelligence community document directly blaming the Chinese government for the outbreak would have a devastating impact on bilateral relations for years to come, a consequence that Donald Trump apparently does not appreciate. And previous interactions initiated by Trump administration officials suggest that Washington might use its preferred weapon sanctions in an attempt to pressure other nations to also hold China accountable, which would multiply the damage.

Given what is at stake in light of the White House pressure to prove what might very well be unprovable, many in the intelligence community who actually value what they do and how they do it are noticeably annoyed and some have even looked for allies in Congress, where they have found support from the Pentagon over Administration decision making that is both Quixotic and heavily politicized.

House Armed Services Committee Chairman Adam Smith of Washington [has responded](#) to the concerns expressed to him by both the military and intelligence communities, admitting that he is “...worried about a culture developing” where many senior officials are now making decision not on the merits of the case but rather out of fear that they will upset the president if they do not choose correctly.

While the intelligence agencies are concerned over the fabrication of a false consensus over the coronavirus, similar to what occurred regarding Iraq’s alleged possession of weapons of mass destruction in 2002-3, the Defense Department is more concerned that fundamental mechanisms that have been in place since the Second World War are now under attack, including how the military maintains discipline and punishes officers and enlisted men who have deviated from established policies.

Appealing to his base of support, Trump has notoriously pardoned Chief Petty Officer Edward Gallagher, a Navy seal who was clearly guilty of murder in Afghanistan, and even met with him afterwards in the White House. Regarding Gallagher, Senate Armed Services Committee Democrat Jack Reed of Rhode Island said in a November that

“The White House’s handling of this matter erodes the basic command structure of the military and the basic function of the Uniform Code of Military Justice.”

Trump is now meddling in the treatment of Navy Captain Brett Crozier, who was relieved of his command after he went public with complains about the spread of coronavirus on his ship. In early April [the president said](#) “I may just get involved.” In the military services such

interference even has a name, “undue command influence.” Clearly, the White House is seeking to squeeze every bit of political advantage it can from the Crozier story.

Congressman Smith has also described the situation in a colorful fashion as

“The president has made it clear as far as he is concerned the single most important attribute that anybody in the federal government can have is a willingness to kiss the president’s ass as often as possible” which “undermines your ability to be competent, to make decisions based on what is the right thing to do as opposed to what is going to feed the president’s limitless ego.”

To be sure, Donald Trump is not about to change and if he is re-elected one can only expect four more years of the same, but public confidence in government can only be maintained if there is at least some belief that decision making is a rational process. Trump has clearly turned that axiom on its head in his tendency to blame other parts of the government for what are manifestly his own failings. His characterization of senior officials, many of whom he himself appointed, as “losers” casts the entire government in a bad light. Whether the strategy of divide and conquer within one’s own administration will work out for Trump will certainly be decided in November.

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